

UPDATE

Prescription Drug Abuse Said to be on the Rise

As many as four million Americans may currently be misusing or abusing prescription drugs that in most cases they obtained from a physician for legitimate medical purposes.

Experts are not sure how many people are actually abusing prescription drugs or what the public health consequences of medication abuse may be. But overall numbers do appear to be increasing. One million, six hundred thousand Americans reported that they used prescription drugs like pain killers, anxiety drugs or stimulants for non-medical purposes for the first time in 1999, up from less than 500,000 per year in the late 1980s, according to the government's National Household Survey on Drug Abuse.

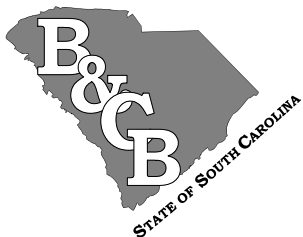
A recent study published in the Journal of the American Pharmaceutical Association put the cost of prescription drug abuse to the U.S. healthcare system at \$177 billion per year.

Experts are most concerned about the elderly since they are the group most likely to use prescription drugs and to be unable to follow a physician's or pharmacist's directions. As many as 17 percent of people over age 60 could be affected by prescription drug abuse, Leshner said. Numbers are also rising in teens and young adults, who have a 37 percent increase in emergency room visits because of overdoses of narcotic pain medications like hydrocodone.

According to 1999 figures, some 750,000 Americans intentionally misused stimulant medications like methylphenidate (Ritalin) during the last year. More than one million people misused sedatives or tranquilizers, while 2.5 million misused opioid and narcotic pain relievers.

The rise represents a dilemma for doctors, who have been recently encouraged to aggressively treat patients' pain and who are bombarded with patient requests for widely advertised anti-anxiety drugs. It is also a conundrum for pharmacists, who are the front lines of defense against people passing forged prescriptions or medication orders that they lied for in order to obtain.

Prevention Partners encourages anyone who is addicted or are misusing prescription drugs to contact their family physician or their local drug and alcohol dependency center to seek help.



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